

Abstract ID : 198

Title : The ontogeny of social play in bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) calves

Category : Behavior

Student : Not Applicable

Preferred Format : Poster Presentation

Abstract : The social play of five captive-born bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) calves was observed for the first year of each calf's life. Observations were conducted weekly using both ad libitum and scan-sampling techniques. Each calf was born into a social group that consisted of one to four older calves/juveniles and three to five adults. This provided a unique opportunity to systematically investigate the ontogeny of social play, and the relative roles of mothers, other adults, and other calves in such play. All calves engaged in frequent amounts of social play, but the other animal(s) involved in these play episodes varied as a function of each calf's age. Calves were most likely to play with their mothers during the first few months of life. Although calves and mothers engaged in social play with one another throughout the entire study period, older calves became increasingly likely to play with dolphins other than their mothers. Social play with other adult dolphins was relatively rare, but social play with other calves began around three months of age, after which time calves became the most common play partners for other calves. These results suggest that social play serves a variety of functions, depending on the age of the calf. Early social play with the mother often involves some form of tactile contact, and seems likely to help mothers and calves bond with one another (as has been demonstrated in a number of primate species, including humans). Play with other adults and other calves is more likely to facilitate the development of the social skills and knowledge necessary to live in a social group, and may lay the foundation for dominance hierarchies within a group of young animals.